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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002167

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS AFTER THE DEATH OF KING BHUMIBOL

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: KING BHUMIBOL WARNS OF RUIN IN THE ABSENCE OF  
UNITY, BUT IS ANYONE LISTENING?

REF: A. BANGKOK 2125 (ABHISIT LOSES POLICE CHIEF BATTLE)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2034 (RED SHIRTS PETITION THE KING)

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ERIC G. JOHN, REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) On August 21, 81-year-old Thai King Bhumibol carefully dipped his feet into Thailand's boiling political waters, warning the Thai people that, among other things, "without cooperation, the country may actually fall to ruin."

The comments, delivered during an audience with civil servants and broadcast on all the evening TV news shows, came just four days after some 20,000 "red-shirt" sympathizers of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had assembled across from the Grand Palace in a show of support for a signature gathering petition campaign seeking royal amnesty for Thaksin (REF A). The King's comments were widely interpreted as an admonishment to the redshirts to curtail anti-government activities, though the actual word usage closely parallels his only other two politically-related messages in the past three years, in April 2006 and December 2007. Throughout his 60 plus years on the throne, King Bhumibol has assiduously steered clear of an overtly political role and delivered only the occasional politically-related speech, making this recent foray all the more noteworthy.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: While there is no question the King is the most widely revered figure in all of Thailand, his recent influence on actual political events and actors is less than either his supporters or detractors acknowledge. By one count, he -- either by himself or through his proxies -- has issued notable public politically-related entreaties as few as a half dozen times since 2001 (birthday speeches in 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2007, plus April 2006, November 2008, and April 21). Only his April 2006 speech to judges had any discernible impact.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment, cont: The King, for one, appears to recognize the limitations of his rhetorical reach, apart from a fine appreciation of the constitutional limitations on his actual power; we know this from private comments made to American

ambassadors over the decades. We believe the King's purported influence actually far exceeds his actual ability to control events, and we expect this most recent speech to have little practical effect. By all indications, the redshirts appear ready to move forward with an August 30 anti-government protest (septel). For its part, PM Abhisit's Cabinet approved an invocation of the Internal Security Act in one district of Bangkok from August 29 through September 1 in order to hedge against the possibility of violence. Now in the deep twilight of his long reign, the King remains deeply venerated by the vast majority of his subjects, and symbolically he remains the central pillar of Thai identity. Despite this adulation and symbolic importance, however, the evidence suggests his ability to influence current events in his Kingdom, on the rare occasions he attempts to do so, is on the wane. End Summary and Comment.

#### A MESSAGE FOR THE REDSHIRTS, OR THE NATION?

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¶4. (SBU) King Bhumibol's August 21 "the country may fall into ruin" line was embedded in comments about the need for cooperation to civil servants presenting him with an international patent for his rain-making technology. The King linked the importance of cooperation to the country's developmental efforts, stating in part: "the country will take a step towards development if there is cooperation among people and government officials with neither side trying to impose themselves upon the other." The King went on to say: "I assure you that those who are knowledgeable and determined will bring true prosperity to the country if they work together. Without their cooperation, the country may fall into ruin. So everyone must help and with good determination the country will make progress and not fall into ruin."

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¶5. (C) With the King's appeal to "work together" in order to avoid allowing the country to "fall into ruin," the Thai media quickly connected the dots and characterized the speech as an attempt to convince the redshirt movement to stop its damaging protests. Human Rights Watch Consultant Sunai Phasuk agreed, telling us August 26 that he also viewed it as the King's last ditch effort to initiate a political reconciliation dialogue.

#### A RELATIVELY RARE FORAY INTO POLITICAL ISSUES

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¶6. (C) Such pronouncements are relatively rare, particularly in the last decade. The speech represented the King's first political comments since December 2007, when he used very similar phraseology during his annual birthday speech calling for unity to avoid national ruin. Since 2001, he has only rarely tackled political issues in the public domain, generally during his annual birthday message. In 2001, his "double standards" speech was interpreted as criticism of the high-handed approach of then-PM Thaksin Shinawatra; in 2003, his "accountability" speech demanded a review of the more than 1000 murders of Thai citizens during Thaksin's War on Drugs; in 2005, his "criticize me" speech rejected an interpretation of lese majeste which prevented any critical commentary about the monarch or monarchy; in April 2006, his "do your duty" address to judges was interpreted as a charge to annul the April 2006 election; and in late 2008, two trusted proxies gave public comments that were intended to tell the People's Alliance for Democracy to cease their protests/occupation of Bangkok's airports. With the exception of the April 2006 speech, his generally thoughtful advice has been widely ignored.

#### DOUBLE STANDARDS (2001) - IGNORED

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¶7. (C) Consider his December 4, 2001, birthday speech, for instance, delivered before local dignitaries including then

PM Thaksin. The King ominously warned of the perils of mixing "ego and double standards," stating that "those who have double standards will keep stumbling because one leg tends to get in the way of the other." The speech appeared to be at least in part a warning shot fired in Thaksin's direction as he consolidated executive power and bullied domestic opponents, yet nothing changed in subsequent months.

Revealingly, when outgoing U.S. Ambassador Richard Hecklinger complimented the King on his speech during a farewell audience two weeks later, the King demurred, comparing himself to the proverbial Buddhist abbot giving a well-intentioned but largely ignored Sunday sermon at the village wat. All the villagers think the admonitions apply to everyone but themselves; once they file out of the wat, he said, nothing changes. "I feel like that abbot," he told the Ambassador.

DO YOUR DUTY (2006) - HEEDED  
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¶8. (C) On the other hand, the King's words have not always fallen on deaf ears. On April 25, 2006, just a few weeks after Thaksin had secured re-election through a disputed election, the King delivered a speech directed squarely at Thailand's judiciary, in what was largely seen as his most overt political guidance since he literally called a Prime Minister and a protest leader on the carpet in May 1992 after bloody protests.

¶9. (C) Speaking before Thailand's Supreme Court, the King said "we are currently having a great crisis. Therefore you have duties to perform, to consult with experts in order to rescue the nation. Right now it has not fallen, (the goal) should be to prevent it from falling, so that we will not then have to rescue it." The speech was interpreted as a clear signal to the Supreme Court to take direct action to resolve the electoral impasse that was gripping Thailand at

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the time, and his message clearly found its mark. On May 8, 2006, the Constitutional Court declared Thaksin's April 2, 2006 election victory null and void, arguing that it had contravened the Constitution.

UNITY (2007-9) - NOT YET  
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¶10. (C) During his December 4, 2007 birthday address (on the occasion of his 80th birthday), the King issued an appeal for national unity, warning that without unity, the nation would face disaster. The King said: "People have complained that Thailand is in trouble, so we must be careful. Foreign analysts have also made dire predictions, so we must be united. If not, the ship will sink." Despite his speech, Thailand's political and social divide continued, though elections later that month returned an elected government to office shortly thereafter.

¶11. (C) Most recently, in late October 2008, the King directed two of his proxies to carry his water for him, Sumet Tantivejakul, the Secretary-General of the King's Chai Pattana Foundation, and Disathorn Wathcharothai, Chair of the Rajanukhrao Foundation. Speaking October 26 before a group of academics closely associated with the yellow shirt movement laying siege to Thailand at the time, supposedly in defense of the monarchy, Sumet called on protesters to "stop violence and secure peace via dialogue."

¶12. (C) Disathorn was even more direct three days later, on October 29 at a seminar in Chumphol. "No matter whether the PAD or UDD, I wish to say that if we love the King, please don't go farming at Government House. Don't go to show forces anywhere....If you love the King, go back home. Showing your power over there makes no benefit at all. Worse, it just creates disunity. I dare to say it here because I am a real man and a real voice. I carry the King's

message." Instead of responding positively to the King's message, however, PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul denounced Sumet and Disathorn's "meddling." Three weeks later, the yellow shirts escalated their activities by seizing the airports.

NEGLIGIBLE IMPACT?

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¶13. (C) For better or for worse, throughout his 62 year reign, King Bhumibol has traditionally tried to keep his powder dry when it comes to politics. His decision to avoid offering a public commentary on the September 2006 coup or the airport seizures in November 2008 underscores this reality, as much as both his supporters and his detractors try to spin a larger role with more power and influence for him. The fact that the King has decided to issue another appeal for unity right now speaks to the sense of urgency he may feel in his twilight, with his mobility and even ability to speak coherently increasingly limited. If recent history is any indication, it seems unlikely this most recent commentary will prove to have much lasting impact on Thailand's political and social divide.

JOHN